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*Manus Manum Lavat: The Handwashing of Middle and Late Republican Politics*

By Bob Wyllie

To be in the senate in the middle and late Roman republic was to be forever concerned with the accumulation of political honors. These honors took the form of offices and were ranked in order of increasing influence culminating in the consulship, of which there were just two each year. The frenzied drive toward these offices was fueled by the fact that success not only spoke well on behalf of the office holder, but also on behalf of his family and his descendents, and with such importance placed on attaining these offices, one may understand the great measures politicians routinely undertook in order to put themselves ahead. If the motives behind actions by those seeking public office are to be well understood, one must first understand what was considered necessary for the attainment of said office. In other words, it is crucial to learn what factors were essential to political success, since these factors will motivate political action. Specifically, I will argue that a politician of the middle and late republic could, for the most part, only succeed if he was well connected politically. Implicit in the above argument is also the claim that *this* aspect of Roman politics remained constant, the fact that success was (for the most part) predicated upon the management and exploitation of the web of relationships.

The first evidence I will bring to bear is the phenomenon of the *novus homo*. The "new man" in Roman politics had a distinct disadvantage, both in the second and first centuries BC. Plutarch says that Cato was opposed in his bid for the consulship because "the patricians deeply resented what they saw as the terrible insult being offered to nobility of birth by the fact that men of humble origins were attaining the highest

status and power,"<sup>1</sup> and Quintus Cicero talks about his brother's status as a *novus homo* as something to be "overcome."<sup>2</sup> But what does this term tell us about Roman politics? What could it mean that family distinction is a reoccurring theme and an all but necessary ingredient to political success, as Plutarch, Cicero, and others seem to indicate?

First and most obviously, it means that politics, *especially high politics* were dominated by "old men." I mean by this simply that the members of the oldest and most politically distinguished families must have monopolized the senate, especially access to high offices, for there to be a stigma against men who were not from such families. That ancient historians like Sallust and Plutarch felt the fact that a man had not come from a distinguished family was pertinent to his character and significant to his actions suggests that new men in high office were outside the norm. In other words, the typical consul would not have been a new man or else there would be no reason pointing out the fact. Plutarch and others set the fact forth as central to one's identity, as it was to Cato's.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Plutarch says Lucius Quinctus' fame, an ex-consul "depended less on his consulship than on the fact that his brother was Titus Flamininus, the conqueror of Philip."<sup>4</sup> Clearly familial connections were of the utmost importance in the times of *both* Cato and Cicero, and even later we hear the Julian clan claiming lineage from Venus, doing

<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Cato*, p 23.

<sup>2</sup> Quintus Cicero speaks about the *novus homo* as detrimental at length in his *Handbook on Canvassing* (see p 33). In addition, Sallust says Cicero got elected "despite" being a new man for reasons connected with the Catalinian Conspiracy in *The War with Cataline* (p 58).

<sup>3</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Cato*, p 8.

<sup>4</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Cato*, p 24

nothing more than claiming distinction through the fame of their purported ancestry.

However, the *novus homo* also tells us that the absence of powerful blood relations could not have been an insurmountable obstacle. A crack existed in the political wall through which exceptionally talented men could squeeze despite the absence of the benefits of distinguished relations, an opening that was just wide enough that Cato and Cicero were both able slip through. But what talents must Cato and Cicero, and other new men as well, have possessed to get through and make use of this opening? One must inquire then what factors allowed these men to succeed despite their lack of distinguished ancestry.

We may begin by noticing that two of the most notable new men, Cato from the middle republic and Cicero from the late, were both very successful and accomplished lawyers. Of what significance is this fact? The first characteristic about Roman lawyers pertinent to our discussion is that they seem to have been successful to the degree of their eloquence. Rhetorical prowess often translated into success at the bar. The next thing of which we should take note is that, as two of the most accomplished lawyers of their respective times, Cato and Cicero would be defending the most powerful and prominent men, and if these defenses were conducted successfully they were bound to earn the appreciation and friendship of the powerful men on whose behalf they spoke. This gave Cato, and later Cicero also, an in with the powerful political figures, and thus the important social circles, of their day. And as they won case after case, they earned the endorsements which would later help to get them elected to the highest offices. My suggestion that connections made by politicians are of the utmost importance should not be taken as a deprecation of the merits of these politicians *qua* politicians,

but rather to emphasize one ability absolutely essential to political success, namely the ability to make allies. The ability of the individual politician to establish and maintain powerful alliances was central to success, and the absence of such an ability led to obscurity in Cato's day, perhaps to proscription in Cicero's. Plutarch tells us "it did not take Cato long to acquire a number of admirers and friends on his own merits as a result of the cases he pleaded in court, and his prestige and influence also grew thanks to Valerius," and later that "Cato attached himself to Fabius Maximus, a man whose reputation and power in the city were second to none, but Cato was more interested in having his character and lifestyle before him as outstanding examples."<sup>1</sup> The word *attached* makes it hard to believe that Cato wanted to hang around a political bigwig like Fabius for the sake of his virtuous example alone. It seems probably that such an association was very valuable and certainly self-serving to Cato, especially since he was a new man.

Lest it be argued that Cato was the exception rather than the rule, one may go to Polybius to see other ways that successful political players successfully maneuvered and managed their relationships to their personal benefit and political betterment. Polybius introduces us to Flamininus, a consul who is winning a war in Greece against Philip.<sup>2</sup> The end of Flamininus' term approaches, and ideally he wants to be able to continue his war as proconsul, win a decisive victory (and collect spoils, of course) and celebrate a triumph. But at worst, he wants to be the one to conclude the peace if he is forced to relinquish his command. For that end he sent his friends

<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Cato*, p 10-11. According to Plutarch, Valerius Flaccus was a powerful man who held high offices, eventually serving with Cato as Censor (p 11).

<sup>2</sup> Polybius, *Affairs in Greece*.

as envoys to see whether the senate planned on replacing him. If that was the case, the envoys were to sue for peace and encourage the senate to agree to the peace terms of Philip. If the senate, however, were to decide to return Flaminius to his command in Greece, the envoys were to argue that Philip's terms were not sufficient and therefore Flaminius would hopefully win a decisive battle and celebrate a triumph of greater glory than if the peace were made immediately. This is an excellent example of a politician manipulating his contacts, perhaps calling in favors, in order to better his own position (quite successfully in this case).

Looking back to Cato, there are other, even more suggestive hints Plutarch drops that Cato was out to make alliances in order to further his career, and that this was how he overstepped his humble origins. For example, Plutarch tells how Cato disapproved of P. Cornelius Scipio Nasica and that "he did not hesitate to quarrel with Scipio the Great, still a young man then, who was a political opponent of Fabius and was generally thought to be resented by him."<sup>1</sup> This incident in itself supports the belief that Cato was playing politics in opposing Nasica, helping out Fabius, his powerful political ally and supporter and keeping a young opponent in check. But more importantly, Plutarch later tells us that Cato's son married Nasica's sister, presumably with Cato's blessing and perhaps his encouragement, and the resulting union is described as an "alliance" to an important family.<sup>2</sup> Such evidence weighs heavily in favor of an emphasis on interpreting middle republic politics as a network of connections between politicians,

and those who were successful within this framework were those who could exploit and manipulate the most connections, of the most powerful people, to their greatest benefit.

The nature of the conditions under which political success could be achieved having been established for the middle republic of the second century BC, the question now becomes whether the importance of being well connected changed during the late republic with the introduction of political turmoil. Do the political changes that take place constantly within the failing republic include a paradigm shift in the requirements for political success, perhaps from prominence placed upon links with certain social elites to a weight on individual merit?

I would argue that the case is the opposite. If anything, where one was located in terms of his associations with other men of power played an increasingly important role as the republic fell. A poor choice of allies led hundreds to their deaths through proscriptions when it turned out that their allies' opponents came out more powerful. Additionally, social ties show up importantly in almost every source contemporary with the times. Quintus Cicero tells his brother, up for election to the consulship, "take care that both the number and rank of your friends are unmistakable... it is a point in your favor that you should be thought worthy of this position and rank by the very men to whose position and rank you are wishing to attain."<sup>3</sup> Further, Quintus says "men conspicuous for their office or name, who, even if they do not give any actual assistance in canvassing, yet add some dignity to the candidate."<sup>4</sup> Throughout the short *Handbook on Canvassing*, Quintus tells Cicero to make everyone his friend and start calling in

<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Cato*, p 11. P. Stadter suggests in an endnote that Plutarch is mistaken about the identity of the Scipio, and it really being P. Cornelius Scipio Nasica (p 439).

<sup>2</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Cato*, p 28.

<sup>3</sup> Quintus Cicero, *Handbook on Canvassing*, p 34.

<sup>4</sup> Quintus Cicero, *Handbook on Canvassing*, p 37.



favours. The book is written as a political theory for building new alliances and fostering those which already exist. It is a theory of relationships, and specifically, *how they can be used to the benefit of a politician*.<sup>1</sup>

Marcus Tullius Cicero writes to Quintus that his consulship had created allies in the province Quintus is governing.<sup>2</sup> In other words, Quintus would have an easier time getting along with certain people because of the relationship those people had to *Quintus' brother*, and Quintus could collect on the political debts owed to his brother in the form of cooperation, support, and friendship. Cicero's description to his brother of the events of Rome constitute a list of the ways Cato, Crassus, Pompey and their supporters interact, a description of who is allied with whom, consequently, who opposes whom.<sup>3</sup> To Cicero, in order to understand the political happenings an understanding of political relationships is essential. It is almost as if politics in Rome were a microcosm of the functioning of the broader politics in which Rome was enmeshed. For example, Italy, during the time of the Second Punic War, was a place where Italian cities threw their lots in with one of two powers, Rome or Hannibal. Those cities which connected themselves to Rome and stayed loyal were rewarded, those which defected and sided with the loser, were severely punished, the civic equivalent of late republican proscription. We can see clearly the same mentality bespeaking the importance of relationships in the tumultuous times of the late republic when Caelius Rufus writes to Cicero: "I think you are alive to this rule, that men ought in a

case of home differences, so long as the contest is carried on constitutionally without an appeal to arms, to follow the party most in the right: when it comes to war and the camp, the stronger party."<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the only thing that changed from the middle to late republic was that the politicians of the late republic could no longer remain neutral. Sides now *had* to be chosen just as an ally during the invasion of Hannibal was forced to choose sides, and the wrong choice resulted in severe punishment for failing to send Rome support. Increasingly the hands of senators were forced and lines were ever being drawn in the political dust. If politicians ever had chosen sides based on what was right instead of what would further their career most, the late republic no longer afforded them that option. But despite these changes I must stick to my assertion that it is the relationships, and the ability to develop them, that made a politician successful in the late republic just as it was true of the middle republic. The most compelling example of this being the triumvirates that grew out of the political mishmash. These arose out of a mutual dependence of their members, a tacit agreement of each to help better the career of the others. For a time all gained influence, power, and wealth *solely* because of this triumvirate, this relationship between some of the most distinguished men of their time. The fact that in each case one person came out on top was simply the result of military luck and skill, but the fact that both Caesars were in a position to use their military to achieve ultimate power they owed to their aptitude at building alliances and keeping friends.

We might end, then, with a look at the example of Atticus, who certainly focused on establishing connections but did not, however, hold office. Atticus must have seen that, by this point in the republic,

<sup>1</sup> If this strikes modern readers particularly close to home, it is, perhaps, for good reason. Political theory is still often reducible to making the most friends possible through the most realistic promises.

<sup>2</sup> Cicero, *Letter to Quintus*(2), p 151.

<sup>3</sup> Cicero, *Letter to Quintus*(1), p 82.

<sup>4</sup> Caelius Rufus, *Letter to Cicero*, p 86.

people just got killed for entering politics, and recognized that he could still wield enormous influence by using his wealth and sitting on the sidelines. When Brutus and Cassius had assassinated Caesar, "Atticus, at that period, conducted himself towards Brutus in such a way, that that young an was not in more familiar intercourse with any one of his own age, than with him who was so advanced in years, and not only paid him the highest honour at the council, but also at his table."<sup>1</sup> Atticus was clearly buddying up with the powerful parties in Rome, as he would later buddy up with Antony.<sup>2</sup> Atticus, removed from Roman politics and living permanently in Greece, was, according to Nepos, against *nothing*, and is in some sense a very successful politician for not engaging in politics. Had he participated in the political turmoil actively, he would have been forced, like the other politicians in Rome, to take sides with one or another of the various people fighting. By staying out of it he was able to support whom he wanted without denouncing anybody. Atticus followed in the political ballroom, and by doing so he never stepped on his partner's toes.

The main points stand that relationships were paramount to political success in both the mid and late republics. Ancestral glory was always helpful to the careers of politicians, but the abilities of individuals to make new personal relationships allowed for the possibility of new men, and in general, successful choices of allies translated into success in politics, to the point in the late republic where the difference between success and failure was the difference between proscribing and being proscribed. Maybe the development of Atticus is inevitable in a system where it

always paid more to associate with people than be associated against them.

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<sup>3</sup> Caelius Rufus, *Letter to Cicero*, p 86.

however, hold office. Atticus must have seen that, by this point in the republic, people just got killed for entering politics, and recognized that he could still wield enormous influence by using his wealth and sitting on the sidelines. When Brutus and Cassius had assassinated Caesar, "Atticus, at that period, conducted himself towards Brutus in such a way, that that young an was not in more familiar intercourse with any one of his own age, than with him who was so advanced in years, and not only paid him the highest honour at the council, but also at his table."<sup>1</sup> Atticus was clearly buddying up with the powerful parties in Rome, as he would later buddy up with Antony<sup>2</sup> Atticus, removed from Roman politics and living permanently in Greece, was, according to Nepos, against *nothing*, and is in some sense a very successful politician for not engaging in politics. Had he participated in the political turmoil actively, he would have been forced, like the other politicians in Rome, to take sides with one or another of the various people fighting. By staying out of it he was able to support whom he wanted without denouncing anybody. Atticus followed in political ballroom, and by doing so he never stepped on his partners toes. The main points stand that relationships were paramount to political success in both the mid and late republics. Ancestral glory was always helpful to the careers of politicians, but the abilities of individuals to make new personal relationships allowed for the possibility of new men, and in general, successful choices of allies translated into success in politics, to the point in the late republic where the difference between success and failure was the difference between proscribing and being proscribed. Maybe the development of Atticus is inevitable in a system where it always paid more to associate with people than be associated against them.

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<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Nepos, *Life of Atticus*, p 236.

<sup>2</sup> Cornelius Nepos, *Life of Atticus*, p 236-7.